

Article

Youth Perception of Public Spaces in the City

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Abstract: For any urban development, the opinion of the final stakeholders is essential. However, the uncensored youth perception regarding the urban environment is rarely included in the decision-making process. Here, we present the youth's perception of public spaces in the city. The empirical research was conducted in Kaunas, which is a typical tertiary city. That is why such results are comparable with findings from other middle-sized cities around the world. The photovoice research method was applied to gather data on youth perception of public spaces. The dataset consisted of 793 unique responses from young people. The qualitative analysis was conducted by using MaxQDA 24 software. Our findings suggest that young people prefer to spend time with friends in man-made urban environments rather than in natural or semi-natural green spaces. Many of their favourite places are considered to be well suited to young people's needs. Suggestions for improving their favourite places mostly revolve around built infrastructure, yet many of them emphasise the importance of sustainable urban development.

Keywords: city; public space; perception; urban development; youth

1. Introduction

As a very cliché statement goes, “Youth are the future”; although the statement holds positive connotations, young people are also very impressionable, so “old” experts have a significant influence in helping youth form their own attitudes. Historical trends demonstrate that the new generation tends to comply with existing perceptions or have reactionary attitudes. These shifts are visible in any city; in every historical epoch, planning practices have left their imprint on the landscape of the city [1,2]. This article explores the current youth's perception of public spaces in urban settings. It is expected that youth bring unique and innovative perspectives to urban planning [1,3–6], which helps foster a dynamic and adaptive urban environment. Because such perspectives are then desirable, citizen science projects often include the collection of ideas and reflections from youth. Additionally, it is now customary to include youth or at least seek to have a diverse age representation among the project participants. At the same time, more and more scientific research is being conducted regarding some aspects of youth (e.g., inclusion, belongingness, various risks, and social vulnerabilities, just to name a few). So, researchers are further incentivised to include youth in various research and/or urban development projects.

1.1. Youth Participation and Inclusion in Scientific Exploration

Youth participation in science is a rapidly developing research area. It was observed that youth inclusion in scientific projects varies widely and is often more versatile, from reflecting on the primary or final results of the investigation to participation in the creation of the research agenda (helping to formulate research question(s), setting up a timeline,



Academic Editor: Mike Jenks

Received: 14 October 2024

Revised: 11 December 2024

Accepted: 19 December 2024

Published: 23 January 2025

Citation: Jurkevičienė, J.; Budrytė, P. Youth Perception of Public Spaces in the City. *Urban Sci.* **2025**, *9*, 25. <https://doi.org/10.3390/urbansci9020025>

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contributing to methodology, etc.) to being ambassadors of the project or overall aim of the investigation [7]. Researchers have advanced an array of models for youth inclusion in science, such as Arnstein's Ladder [8] or its adaptation (like R. Hart's Ladder of Young People's Participation [9]) or creating a two-dimensional matrix of representation for participation intensity [10] and decision-making power or hub-and-spoke network typology [11]. However, these suggestions are not entirely suitable for youth inclusion in scientific research because the process is different from the political decision-making process in meaningful ways. Thus, youth involvement is usually organised according to logic, timelines, and activities of scientific research, which could cause challenges for conventional project management but also provides ample opportunities for education and raising awareness of the situation or research object [1,12–14]. These constraints and advantages must be considered when evaluating a model of youth inclusion in science.

As stated earlier, youth contributions to scientific investigation are very diverse, particularly in their complexity. One of the most straightforward contributions is data collection. Data collection could be paper-based or digital. However, recent advancements in digital technologies have made it easy to collect digital data. Some of these tools could be gamified in order to facilitate more active participation [15]. Poplin et al. (2022) showed how digital geo-games and gamified storytelling can effectively involve youth in co-creating living environments [16]. Such tools also blur the distinction between data collection and data primary analysis (like observation or reflection) and bring opportunities for more in-depth investigation. They encourage an iterative process. On the opposite side of complexity, youth inclusion creates the research agenda and defines the research hypothesis. Here, various interactive sessions with the entire research team are well-acknowledged beneficial tools. Youth inclusion in research establishes a different dynamic and work pace, which could be questionable from a classic research arrangement but also enhances relevance and validity [17]. Various gamification techniques complicate the documentation of the research methods and their implementations, as well as the collection of primary and final results. This makes such investigations harder to replicate, which is why their inclusion should only follow careful consideration.

Although challenging from an implementation perspective, youth inclusion could be very beneficial, especially in the natural sciences and applied investigations and development. Many researchers observed that youth participation in urban planning contributes to creating more inclusive, sustainable, and family-friendly urban spaces [1,5,18,19]. Some studies suggest that the inclusion of youth can support sustainable development principles in urban planning projects [4,19,20]. However, the inclusion of young people's voices requires the adaptation of existing processes to become more inclusive and accommodating [3,19]. This opens up a process for other marginalised groups and their leaders to become more aware of different perspectives and more attuned to considering diverse opinions in various expressions [3,21]. Derr and Kovács (2015) argued that youth participation can lead to attitudinal changes towards government, increased recognition of diverse needs, and integration of social and environmental sustainability in planning recommendations [4]. So, the final product of a project that meaningfully involves young people often reflects the needs of most residents of the city or locale [19]. By opting to include the youth perspective, city managers and urban developers become more capable of reflecting on and incorporating a wider range of ideas. By building meaningful attitudes and relations with the city, youth will be empowered to contribute to city development with strong, thoughtful engagement and without resentment. This, in turn, will foster an aware and engaged society that is able and willing to participate in the decision-making process.

Youth inclusion holds several challenges for all parties involved in the process and beyond. Firstly, the power dynamic must be addressed [5,22,23] so that prominent experts

will not overwhelm nor diminish young participants and youth perceptions will be heard equally and respectfully [24]. Some authors suggest that some pedagogical skills are much needed in such projects [25], while others maintain that some issues will always remain, and inclusion should instead be sensitive to such circumstances [24]. Although the inclusion of youth is becoming more popular, pre-existing attitudes and expectations from the youth still hinder communication and the productive implementation of urban planning. Furthermore, youth involvement is often part (or a focus) of the scientific/research/innovative project and not the dominant political agenda. Hence, the evaluation of these findings still only partly represents existing practices, processes, and outcomes. It is very important to any analysis that the contributions of young people be very limited, localised and short-term.

1.2. Youth Perceptions of Public Places

While the balance of benefits and disadvantages of youth inclusion in scientific exploration becomes murkier as the complexity of the youth contribution increases, the youth perspective on urban development is clearly beneficial to project outcomes. If one were to examine youth perception towards green places in the city, some aspects would become more prevalent, like health and physical activity, general well-being and mindfulness [26]. For example, it was observed that boys and young men often appreciate active, sport-dedicated areas more than girls or women [27,28]. So, their expectations of public spaces will be different. Additionally, youth value the greenery in the city due to the space for socialising and relaxing [6,29]. Such spots are often valued by teenage girls [27,28]. So, if parks are created with diverse zones reflecting different needs, like walking pathways, sports facilities, and calm and silent places, they have to achieve a quality of well-being for society, including youth [30–32]. Overall, youth seek green spaces that promote physical and mental well-being while fostering social interactions and connection with nature [6,33].

Additionally, youth's perception about green public spaces is often closely linked with the scenic qualities of the place, like cleanliness and comfort [33]. The accessibility of infrastructure and whether that infrastructure contributes to the main purpose of the place are also important [26,33]. According to Sampaio Costa et al. (2024), youth appreciate the naturalness of the parks, e.g., sufficient vegetation. Additionally, they also recognise the benefits of natural spaces in the cities for overall biodiversity, beauty [34,35] and built-up environmental attractiveness [33]. Further, as new developments of sensory gardens are emerging amongst urban green spaces, youth have more opportunities to explore the environment, experience fresh air or simply relax [36]. Scenic beauty could be associated with visual arts and/or protest expression (e.g., graffiti culture, tagging and so on). For this reason, small architecture in public spaces could be used to communicate certain ideas [37] (e.g., temporary sculptures, stages for pop-up concerts/shows). However, sometimes, such expressions could be considered vandalism or destruction of public property.

Another youth expectation of public spaces is related to the multifunctionality of the place [38,39]. Young people desire various pieces of equipment suitable for physical or outdoor activities. Younger children appreciate stimulating environments regardless of their gender, yet the differences in adolescents' gender have become more apparent. Male adolescents prefer places for team-based physical activities. Meanwhile, female adolescents seek less noisy and calm places for leisure activities [23,28,40–42]. Additionally, with age, the appreciation for cultural and potential political features notably increases [43]. Furthermore, youth appreciate public spaces as a place for activism, to stage a protest, or to simply publicly voice their opinions. That said, even though young people recognise the cultural benefits provided by public spaces and acknowledge that they could be place attachment sources, there is little debate about green place development educational and cultural identity services compared with other age cohorts [28,29,43]. As public spaces

have a diverse range of functions, it is important to ensure that the tools and measures used should be equally diverse. For example, the implementation of interactive new digital technologies improves the attractiveness of a place and increases the number of visitors to the place [44]. Often, such renovations are considered to be youth-friendly developments.

To sum up, youth could be seen as active members of the community who have their own opinions and experiences in public spaces. At times, it is hard to communicate their observations, expectations and wishes regarding existing or newly developing public spaces by applying unconventional methods [4,23]. Meanwhile, several recent studies show that it is very beneficial to “hear” young people’s opinions or even include them throughout the entire development process [3,4,45]. As observed by several researchers, such direct inclusion leads to an end result that is better suited for the community, especially the members of that community who have less of a voice or have special needs [3,46]. Although young people appreciate the traditional qualities of nature’s beauty and benefits, they also expect comfort, and the newest digital technologies guarantee the fulfilment of such expectations. Finally, youth perceive multifunctional places as more attractive and welcoming.

2. Materials and Methods

In this research, the method of photovoice was applied. It is a participatory action research method that allows youth to capture their urban environment through photographs and engage in critical dialogue about their experiences [47]. Earlier applications of the photovoice method allowed researchers to achieve insightful observations that resulted in in-depth conclusions [47–52]. This method helped address issues ranging from environmental degradation to the health or social experiences of refugees, as well as community characteristics and so on.

During our participatory research, youth were asked to identify public spaces in the city where they enjoy spending time with friends, visit these spaces and take photos. Also, participants were asked to rate the suitability of the spaces for the younger generation and to describe the anticipated changes in the future that might improve how these spaces cater to the interests of the youth.

The research targeted first-year students of Kaunas University of Technology in Lithuania who were enrolled in the “Sustainable Development” module. It was conducted in two phases, covering the months of November 2023 and April 2024, with 208 students participating over the entire study period. The research covered only students from STEM study programmes (e.g., Informatics Engineering, Mechanical Engineering, Mechatronics, Intelligent Robotics Systems, Electronics Engineering, etc.). Almost eighty per cent of the students were male, and almost all (with three exceptions) were in the age category 18–25 years. The results were collected by email. Further details about the sample can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of the research sample.

Variable	N	%
Language of studies:		
Lithuanian	79	38%
English	129	62%
Time of participation in the survey:		
November 2023	141	68%
April 2024	67	32%
Location of public spaces assessed:		
Kaunas city (place of studies)	164	79%
Other spaces	44	21%

Each participant in the research evaluated 3 to 4 public spaces in the city, resulting in a total of 807 evaluations. The data collected were carefully reviewed and processed by the authors. During this process, evaluations of urban spaces in which students rated private spaces belonging to themselves or their relatives (such as the kitchen of a private flat, a grandparent's garden house, etc.) instead of their favourite public spaces were removed from the analysis. Additionally, evaluations that did not allow for the precise identification of the space, such as those lacking the exact name or location, or where there was a mismatch between the name of the space and the accompanying photograph or description, were also removed. In total, 14 spaces were excluded from the study for the described reasons. The final database consisted of 793 evaluations of urban public spaces.

The qualitative data from the photovoice research were analysed through a mixed-method content analysis. The responses provided by participants were coded and categorised using a code system mainly arranged by inductive principles where photos and brief curated descriptions are observed and evaluated. During the primary data investigation, several potential variable codes were identified, such as degree of human impact, available activities, condition of public space, and suitability for young people, just to name a few. Later, through further investigation, these primary codes were developed and formalised as the variables used in this analysis.

Suggestions for place development were analysed in-depth in order to maintain a wider scope and not exclude creative ideas or lose data-rich answers in the "other" code. Here, the insightful, innovative and/or representative answers are selected to provide examples in support of our argumentation.

The data analysis was conducted using the software package Maxqda24 (under the license for Kaunas University of Technology). It is important to note that we employed a double coding method to ensure the reliability of the coding process. In this double coding approach, 10% of the randomly selected public space evaluations—amounting to 80 evaluations—were coded by two researchers. After this initial coding, the researchers assessed intercoder agreement and identified any systematic coding errors. Corrections were made throughout the sample based on these findings. Following these corrections, the intercoder agreement was measured again to ensure consistency.

For the final assessment, Cohen's kappa coefficient was calculated, yielding results that ranged from 86% to 100% across the various codes. The average Cohen's kappa coefficient for all codes in the study was 95%. According to the recommendations of methodologists [53] and in line with previously published content analyses [54,55], this level of agreement demonstrates a high degree of confidence in the reliability of the coding.

The main limitation of this study is the non-representative nature of the sample. As a result, the findings of this study are only applicable to the sample under examination. To expand the applicability of the results to the broader population of young people across the country, it is necessary to conduct a more extensive empirical study in the future.

3. Results

Research indicates that the majority of young people who participated in the photovoice survey expressed a preference for spending time with their friends in man-made urban public spaces, as opposed to green, natural or semi-natural areas (see Figure 1a). This preference was expressed by approximately 83% of the photovoice participants. Additionally, participants were more likely to select outdoor locations (44% of participants) over indoor ones or spaces that combine indoor and outdoor features (see Figure 1b). These findings align with other studies indicating that individuals generally prefer well-developed, multifunctional spaces that accommodate a range of their needs [56]. They also align with

investigations demonstrating that young people who engage in outdoor leisure activities tend to report higher levels of happiness [57].

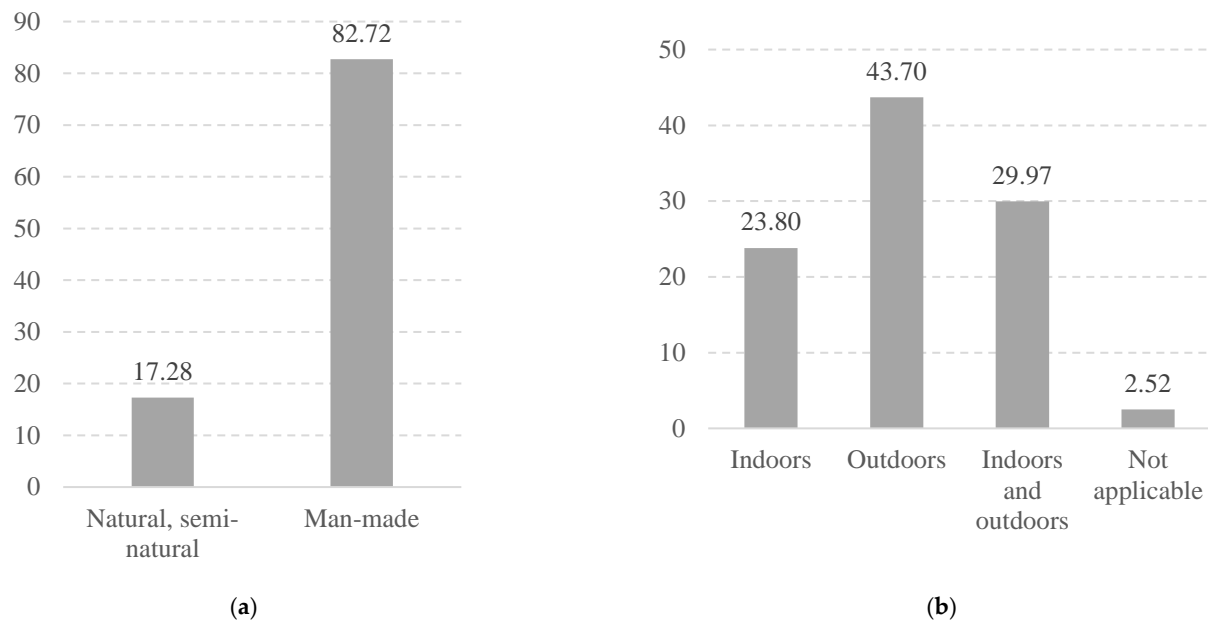


Figure 1. (a) Public spaces, according to the human impact, N = 793. (b) Indoor vs. outdoor spaces, N = 793. (Source: Authors).

Preferences for urban public spaces differ based on the cultural backgrounds of young people. Both Lithuanian-speaking youth of Lithuanian origin and English-speaking youth, mostly consisting of foreigners, expressed a preference for spending time with friends in man-made urban public spaces. However, there were notable differences in the preferences regarding other characteristics of these spaces. For instance, among Lithuanian-speaking youth, the majority of respondents (57.5%) preferred outdoor spaces. In contrast, among English-speaking youth, preferences between indoor/outdoor and outdoor public spaces were more evenly distributed, with 36.9% favouring indoor/outdoor spaces and 34.1% preferring outdoor ones.

A more detailed analysis of the photovoice data shows that young people mostly preferred cultural, entertainment and social venues for meeting with their friends. This preference was observed in 24% of all venues assessed (see Figure 2). Squares, plazas, and streets were also mentioned by young people as other favourite places, with a particular emphasis on the main squares in cities, as well as parks and waterfront areas. Commercial shopping centres, public artworks and installations, transport hubs, and bridges and stairs were among the least frequent choices. The category “other” included spaces mentioned sporadically, such as an underpass, a dog play area, etc.

Prior research has shown that youth prefer socialising in various venues, including public places and entertainment places. These places play a crucial role in identity formation and in building social networks [58,59]. The significance of these places is noted in various cultural contexts [60]. According to Robertson et al. (2018), youth tend to use places in innovative ways [59]. Public places could also be a focus point for a sense of belonging [58]. Hence, the development of these places could greatly shape young people’s public engagement experience and build their trust and control of the environment [58]. Additionally, various leisure venues, in particular cafes, bars, and nightclubs, provide accessible venues for the urban youth lifestyle [60]. The results of the photovoice activities match these earlier findings and support them equally. Youth in Kaunas were identifying the places where they could locate and socialise with other youth or which are promoted

by popular youth and important influencers. These places, then, also represent the youth's quest for identity formation.

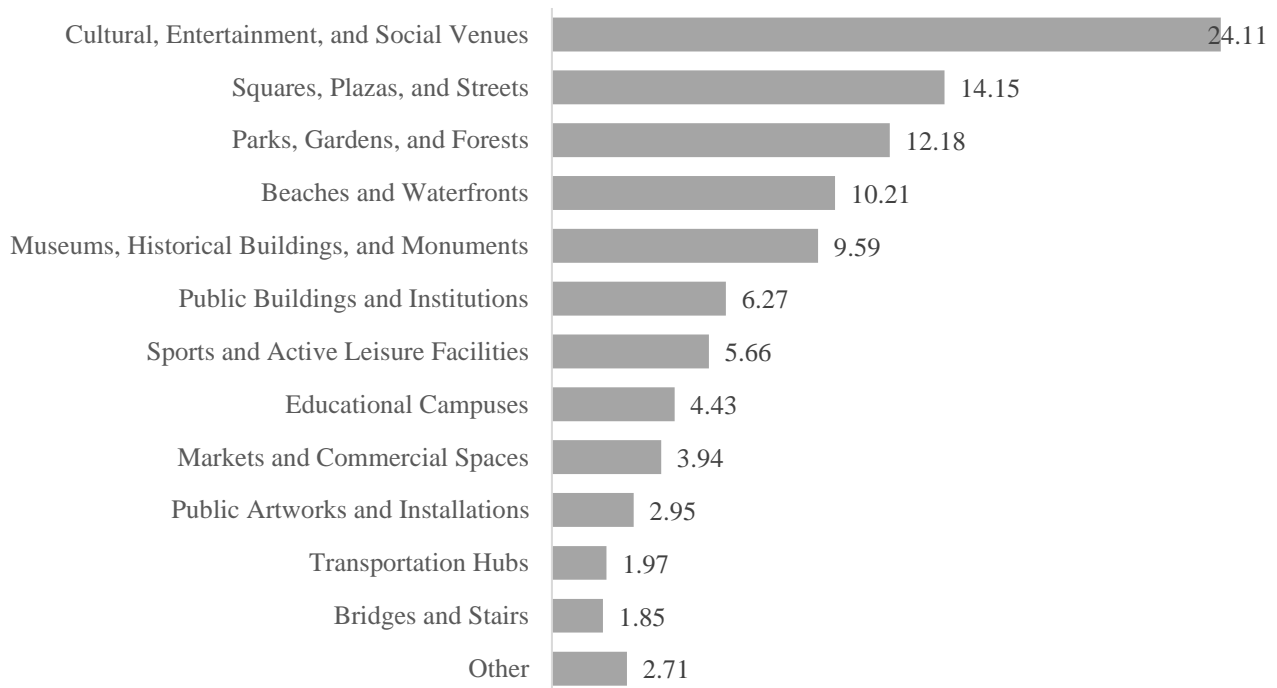


Figure 2. Types of public spaces, N = 793. (Source: Authors).

Preferences for types of urban public spaces vary based on the cultural backgrounds of the youth. For example, among Lithuanian-speaking youth of Lithuanian origin, the most preferred public spaces for spending time with friends were parks, gardens, and forests (15%). This was followed by squares, plazas, and streets (14.7%), beaches and waterfronts (14.1%), and finally, cultural, entertainment, and social venues (13.8%). This indicates that Lithuanian students often prioritise urban public spaces that are closely connected to the natural environment. In contrast, among English-speaking youth, the majority of whom are foreigners, the most preferred spaces were cultural, entertainment, and social venues (31.3%). This preference was followed by squares, plazas, and streets (13.8%), museums, historical buildings, and monuments (10.6%), and parks, gardens, and forests (10.2%). This suggests that foreign students tend to favour more urbanised spaces that offer a variety of man-made activities and attractions.

Most public spaces used for meeting friends were deemed quite suitable for young people, with 75% of all assessed locations falling into this category. It is important to mention that there was a positive correlation between the perception of public spaces as suitable for young people and their selection as preferred locations for friendship gatherings. Specifically, there was a strong correlation between public spaces categorised as “Cultural, Entertainment, and Social Venues” and the assessment of a public space as youth-friendly (see Table 2). Additionally, a moderate correlation was identified between the rating of public spaces as youth-friendly and the categories “Squares, Plazas, and Streets” and “Museums, Historical Buildings, and Monuments”, and a weak correlation between the rating of public spaces as youth-friendly and the “Parks, Gardens, and Forests”, “Beaches and Waterfronts”, and “Public Buildings and Institutions”. These trends were common to both Lithuanian-speaking and English-speaking students.

Table 2. Correlation between the type of public space and its evaluation as youth friendly, Spearman's rho, N = 793. (Source: Authors).

Public Space Elements	Is the Public Space Suitable for Young People?			
	Yes	No	Neither Yes, nor No	No Answer
Cultural, Entertainment, and Social Venues	0.604 ($p = 0.0000$)	0.131 ($p = 0.1788$)	0.191 ($p = 0.0484$)	0.028 ($p = 0.7774$)
Squares, Plazas, and Streets	0.444 ($p = 0.0000$)	0.123 ($p = 0.2063$)	0.182 ($p = 0.0611$)	0.006 ($p = 0.9528$)
Parks, Gardens, and Forests	0.203 ($p = 0.0357$)	0.248 ($p = 0.0101$)	0.175 ($p = 0.0708$)	0.219 ($p = 0.0234$)
Beaches and Waterfronts	0.289 ($p = 0.0025$)	0.033 ($p = 0.7322$)	0.149 ($p = 0.1260$)	-0.079 ($p = 0.4203$)
Museums, Historical Buildings, and Monuments	0.448 ($p = 0.0000$)	0.115 ($p = 0.2378$)	0.308 ($p = 0.0012$)	0.117 ($p = 0.2285$)
Public Buildings and Institutions	0.212 ($p = 0.0285$)	0.396 ($p = 0.0000$)	0.433 ($p = 0.0000$)	-0.016 ($p = 0.8671$)
Sports and Active Leisure Facilities	0.089 ($p = 0.3594$)	0.034 ($p = 0.7297$)	-0.071 ($p = 0.4662$)	0.108 ($p = 0.2698$)
Educational Campuses	0.187 ($p = 0.0534$)	-0.062 ($p = 0.5289$)	-0.029 ($p = 0.7689$)	0.371 ($p = 0.0001$)
Markets and Commercial Spaces	0.174 ($p = 0.0723$)	-0.087 ($p = 0.3749$)	-0.029 ($p = 0.7632$)	0.032 ($p = 0.7412$)
Public Artworks and Installations	0.126 ($p = 0.1960$)	0.324 ($p = 0.0007$)	0.268 ($p = 0.0053$)	-0.057 ($p = 0.5571$)
Transportation Hubs	0.089 ($p = 0.3613$)	0.196 ($p = 0.0430$)	0.084 ($p = 0.3870$)	0.100 ($p = 0.3037$)
Bridges and Stairs	0.029 ($p = 0.7684$)	0.153 ($p = 0.1148$)	0.099 ($p = 0.3117$)	-0.063 ($p = 0.5185$)
Other	-0.168 ($p = 0.0829$)	0.399 ($p = 0.0000$)	0.061 ($p = 0.5330$)	-0.068 ($p = 0.4840$)

Colours correspond to the correlation significance; the darker grey, the stronger the correlation.

Some of the places used for meeting with friends were seen by students as not being suitable for young people's needs. This assessment was made for 17% of public spaces. Correlation analysis showed that public spaces categorised as "Public Buildings and Institutions" and "Public Artworks and Installations" were more often perceived as not suitable for young people. However, there was only a weak correlation between the categorisation of public spaces in these categories and negative evaluation.

Finally, around 7% of the spaces used for meeting with friends were rated by students as neither suitable nor unsuitable for young people. This rating was generally given to spaces that were perceived as controversial, highlighting both positive and negative aspects. For example, in the case of museums in the category "Museums, Historical Buildings, and Monuments", it was stressed that, while they are useful for educational purposes for young people, they are often too boring, lacking interactive elements and inclusiveness. Similarly, churches in the "Public Buildings and Institutions" category were also perceived controversially, with contrasting attitudes towards the impressive architecture of the church buildings, which fascinate and attract young people, and the church itself as an institution, which is of little interest to young people except for very religious young individuals. The assessment that the area is neither suitable nor unsuitable for young people was also made in cases where students identified the sites as being currently under renovation.

This study also aimed to identify the relationship between students' assessment of public spaces and the condition of those spaces (see Table 3). To do this, the students' favoured public spaces were categorised into five groups based on their condition: (a) good condition (new, modern), (b) good (renovated, maintained), (c) fair, (d) poor, and (e) not applicable. The analysis revealed that students most commonly rated renovated public spaces in good condition and well-maintained green areas as suitable for young people. There was a strong correlation between public spaces in good condition (renovated and/or

maintained) and the perception that they are suitable for young people. Students also often considered ultra-modern, new public spaces and public spaces in average condition as youth-friendly but noted that the former were often inaccessible due to high costs, and the latter required renovation or more maintenance.

Table 3. Correlation between the condition of public space and its evaluation as youth-friendly, Spearman's rho, N = 793. (Source: Authors).

Condition of Public Space	Is the Public Space Suitable for Young People?			
	Yes	No	Neither Yes, nor No	No Answer
Good (new, modern) ¹	0.467 ($p = 0.0000$)	0.129 ($p = 0.1857$)	0.128 ($p = 0.1883$)	-0.027 ($p = 0.7804$)
Good (renovated, maintained) ²	0.764 ($p = 0.0000$)	0.004 ($p = 0.9705$)	0.108 ($p = 0.2691$)	-0.022 ($p = 0.8198$)
Fair ³	0.473 ($p = 0.0000$)	0.425 ($p = 0.0000$)	0.460 ($p = 0.0000$)	0.193 ($p = 0.0458$)
Poor ⁴	-0.164 ($p = 0.0919$)	0.476 ($p = 0.0000$)	0.057 ($p = 0.5619$)	0.245 ($p = 0.0109$)
Not applicable ⁵	-0.094 ($p = 0.3334$)	0.207 ($p = 0.0326$)	-0.031 ($p = 0.7515$)	-0.038 ($p = 0.7006$)

¹ Good (new, modern) condition means that the space is newly installed, has a modern design, and no obvious defects. ² Good (renovated, maintained) condition means that the space is older but underwent a renovation and therefore has no or hardly any visible defects. If the space is a green space, it is well maintained (e.g., mowed grass, pedestrian paths, lighting, etc.). ³ Fair condition means that the condition of the space is average, with obvious defects, but the space can still be used. ⁴ Poor condition means that the space is in a particularly poor condition, with major defects that prevent the space from being used safely. ⁵ Not applicable denotes spaces that were undergoing renovation at the time of the research. Colours correspond to the correlation significance; the darker the grey, the stronger the correlation.

Public spaces in poor or fair condition were more often considered unsuitable for young people, with a focus on safety risks for visitors and the overall state of the spaces. There was a moderate correlation between fair and poor public space conditions and the perception that the public space was not youth-friendly. All of these tendencies were typical for both Lithuanian- and English-speaking students.

As was established in our theory section, the discussions about youth perceptions of public spaces are often related to physical activities, multiuse development, nature, culture and aesthetics. These perceptions yield multifunctionality expectations (e.g., the park must have the infrastructure needed for group sports games and peaceful yoga classes, or it must be natural in its view yet also provide a good Wi-Fi connection). Youth also blend their cultural attitudes into their multifunctional expectations (e.g., the public space is suitable for a calm music concert, but also could be used for activism and protest). In order to explore attitudes about public spaces in this empirical investigation, four categories were formed. They are attitudes and evaluations regarding (1) built infrastructure, (2) culture, (3) aesthetics, and (4) sustainable measures.

As scientific literature has illuminated, youth usually voice concerns about environmental health, physical activity, the safety of their neighbourhoods, and general well-being. According to Bogar et al. (2017), youth are aware of health issues related to unfortunate social situations like job loss or crime, but less aware of the deleterious effects of certain environmental matters (like lead poisoning) [12]. Meanwhile, the built urban environment dictates how society (including youth) behaves in that given context [61,62]. It is very noticeable during the research on physical activity. The positive link between a satisfactory and safe built environment leads to higher levels of various physical activities [63–65]. The research on the visitation of public parks showed that various designated areas for sports (like basketball, netball, or volleyball courts) attract the most physical activity. Rivera et al. (2021) also composed the priority list from the perspective of adolescents (average age 14 years) for the most attractive features (most preferred by young users) in the park to boost physical activity [64]. On this list, the dominant features for female and male participants are sports courts, grassy open spaces, and outdoor fitness equipment. In

our research, although youth are older, they still quite appreciate the infrastructures that support sports (like outdoor training equipment). Also, the most frequently listed desired improvements (see Table 4) are linked to the infrastructure, which allows versatile physical activity (answers vary from mini golf, night volleyball court, discotheque floor, bicycle paths, knights' tournaments, table tennis, and so on).

Table 4. Youth expectations on built infrastructure and organisation of activities for physical activities in public places. (Source: Authors).

Feature	Expectation
Infrastructure	"need bike stands", "some of the courts are a bit old and hoops are not in the best conditions, so it can be improved", "swings for adults are missing"; "establishment of bicycle paths", "establish night volleyball court", "establish more pedestrian pathways"; "I would suggest that more chairs could be provided"
Management	"organise sports events with the prize", "more equipment for outdoor games".

The quality of urban public space can be evaluated not only in terms of its physical, aesthetic, and environmental sustainability attributes but also in relation to the cultural dimensions and activities that shape its character and appeal. Cultural events and activities have the potential to influence and alter the use and function of public areas, as well as visitor satisfaction. According to Ezzeldin and Assem (2020), "events and activities are the social dynamic lived-in part of any public space; they transform the physical perceived space into a conceived life place" [66]. Throughout our photovoice data, cultural considerations often appear amongst suggestions (see Table 5). Youth expect to see some interactive exhibitions, festivals and/or shows. Such events could be orientated to street art but not limited to it. Additionally, the youth emphasised the importance of aesthetic beauty and pointed out the opportunities for beautification of the places (like planting some flowers or plants, implementing new art pieces, etc.).

Table 5. Culture in public places. (Source: Authors).

Feature	Expectation
Infrastructure	"organise interactive exhibitions", "implement picnic places", "establish bonfire places", "I miss places dedicated for young artists", "make the square more beautiful and cozy", "some flowers could be planted to make it more beautiful"
Management	"organise festivals", "establish group activities", "promote table games", "organise an orienteering event about the exhibition items", "organise street art events", "establish discotheque", "I would like to offer to use art pieces made by young artists to decorate the park"

Although some public spaces are much appreciated by youth, there are some features of public spaces which could cause repulsion and discourage visitation to the place. Usually, the negative perception is linked to safety considerations. At times, it is infrastructure-based, such as the presence of deteriorated buildings or insufficient lighting. In other instances, it is social-based, with issues like high crime rates, undesirable people around, etc. Lack of cleanliness is also a decisive contributing factor to choosing not to visit public places [67]. Amongst our collection of answers, waste management-related suggestions appeared quite often (for example, "add recycling bins"; "cleaning events to maintain the territory's cleanliness", and "cleaning beaches and lakes"). These observations are common in the scientific literature as well [29,33,42,65,68]. Additionally, youth often listed suggestions related to safety infrastructure, like a need to have more lighting fixtures, CCTV cameras, etc. However, the most often discussed infrastructure is seating (benches, social

seating such as picnic tables and so on), as well as technology-related infrastructure (Wi-Fi, technology charging points).

In terms of the aesthetic dimension of youth evaluations, participants regularly mentioned the beauty of nature and their appreciation of existing naturalness. They also suggested that there is a need to plant more trees, plants and flowers. These suggestions are again in line with the trends reported in the urban studies. For example, Hansen and Alvarez (2010) found that the physical characteristics of plants give unique features to the landscape [69]. Shu et al. (2022) showed that plants in public urban spaces, due to their shapes, textures, size and colours, provide aesthetic experiences that are pleasing to young people [70]. Similarly, the work of Thorpert and Nielsen (2014) demonstrated that the perception of vegetation colours is inseparable from people's experience of the landscape and can influence mood and feelings [71].

The last group of evaluations is likened to environmental concerns. In the scientific literature, some research shows that youth, in comparison to other generations, have higher environmental awareness [72]. Yet, other research did not find a significant correlation between different generations and support for environmental protection, policies and willingness to act accordingly [73,74]. Our research shows that youth are conscious about sustainability (especially methods for waste management, sustainable dietary options, green energy, etc.). Furthermore, the youth's suggestions for further development of the area were guided implicitly by environmentally conscious concerns or explicitly environmentally conscious (see Table 6). Some of the participants directly stated their wishes that public places "should extend the idea of exploring and entertaining with interactive and more environmentally friendly options for youth". The majority of the suggestions for improvement are closely linked to building infrastructure (like the installation of solar panels for local lights, energy-saving measures, fashioning benches from recycling material or recycling benches themselves); some of these suggestions are more creative and innovative (e.g., install energy-producing pathways). Youths have high expectations for recycling opportunities, and a lot of them noticed that there is a lack of recycling waste bins in public spaces. Some of them also pointed out that drinkable water fountains could be a step towards more sustainable public space. Additionally, sustainable suggestions have a wide range of managerial suggestions. They stem from organising regular farmers' markets to encourage vegan options in local youth gathering places as well as the overarching goal of improving biodiversity by preserving existing species and reintroducing extinct local species.

Table 6. Environmental consciousness. (Source: Authors).

Feature	Expectation
Infrastructure	"provision of more bins for recycling", "energy saving lights", "use of recycled materials", "install solar panels", "energy-saving lighting", "drinkable water station"
Management	"introduce farmers' market", "provide vegan food options", "enhance fisheries", "perform annual sustainability fairs", "provide ecologic lessons on the wildlife in the area", "cleaning events to maintain the stair territory cleanliness"

As past research has clearly indicated, youth are very capable of presenting their views on public spaces, and they are also able to be critical towards existing situations and innovative in their suggestions for the development of such places. Their suggestions varied from self-orientated answers (like, "I would demolish this place", "I would add more lighting", "I would add some benches", "I would add a fountain"), to those made on behalf of different societal groups or the general population ("the prevention infrastructure for suicide attempts is needed", "the signs for pedestrian pathways are needed to improve

safety”, “poor pathway quality”). For urban planners, youth proposals can serve as a source of inspiration, as well as a new opportunity to create more attractive and more inclusive urban spaces.

Policy Recommendations

This empirical research shows that youth have strong capabilities to provide meaningful observations and suggestions regarding public spaces. The process of youth participation in the decision making has well-established benefits for society and could inspire innovative developmental choices and measures as well as management applications. This is why the inclusion of youth should be considered in urban planning; young people’s innovation and sensitivity to contemporary issues and the needs of diverse populations improve public spaces. Additionally, although research on youth environmental attitudes is still inconclusive, youth who participated in the study presented a strong environmental consciousness; their suggestions for the development of public spaces often include considerations regarding how to preserve existing amenities, adapt to a climate change-affected future and minimise effects from the negative shifts caused by climate change, biodiversity loss, urbanisation, etc. So, for today’s policymakers, the inclusion of youth in urban development could mean that the consideration of timely issues and innovative solutions to those issues would not be missed.

The debate around youth involvement and participation is often coloured by concern regarding the attraction and maintained engagement of youth for extended time periods. One of the ways to encourage sustained expert and youth interaction is through higher education institutions; here, various real-time situations could be provided as a curriculum activity and later discussed with the experts. During such partnership attempts, a wider audience and a broader and more diverse sample of youth will be included. Additionally, open debates in a respectful and supportive manner are beneficial to establish trustworthy relationships that could lead to inspiring discussions about public space, the meaning and legacy of public space, development opportunities and expectations, etc.

The final policy consideration that could be taken from this empirical research is that the inclusion of youth facilitates opportunities for novel technologies and sustainability concerns. Youth are unquestionably eager to seek new technologies, tools and measures; and they are keen to explore them in a playful manner. Additionally, as they often share a high environmental consciousness, youth often aim to look for technological solutions for environmental issues. So, meaningful reflection about other types of solutions (social, political, administrative, economic, etc.) should be included in the general decision-making process.

4. Conclusions

To conclude, this article has offered an explorative investigation on youth perceptions of public places in Kaunas, Lithuania and beyond. Our literature review showed that youth are invited to take active roles in various urban development projects increasingly often and that the benefits of that inclusion have become increasingly clear. So far, research has shown that youth are motivated and interested in joining such projects but also feel left out or constrained by experts, older participants or the existing bureaucracy of the decision-making process. Furthermore, other investigations indicated that youth are willing to take environmentally friendly actions and support processes in the interest of establishing environmentally sound decisions. Our results strongly support these findings. Our participants indicated that their most favourable youth places are those related to entertainment, culture and social venues, yet they appreciate and expect the natural beauty in public spaces. Additionally, youth expect public green spaces to be clean, have many comforts, be suitable for various physical activities, and provide a spot for mindfulness. Young people’s

subjective improvement proposals cover several distinct areas. They range from cultural, aesthetic or artistic suggestions to sustainability-orientated solutions to comfort-related infrastructure. Our qualitative investigation demonstrates compelling evidence for youth's capacity to be productive, inspiring and insightful participants in urban development discussions as well as promote innovative ideas and consider sustainable solutions. The issues identified by young people and the innovativeness of their solutions to those issues could enhance the attractiveness of the place and improve accessibility to it.

As a concluding remark, it is necessary to emphasise the importance of investigations that focus on less prominent or non-iconic urban examples. Middle-sized cities and towns, often overshadowed by large metropolitan areas in academic research, offer unique insights that can significantly contribute to the development of broader urban theories. By comparing and expanding case studies from such contexts, researchers can identify patterns, challenges, and opportunities that are otherwise overlooked, creating a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of urban dynamics. Moreover, this article explored only a small part of the investigation on the youth's perception of public spaces. However, more elaborate research could help uncover underexplored dimensions of urban development, particularly in fostering inclusivity, trust, and sustainable growth. Such efforts would not only enrich the academic discourse but also provide actionable insights for policymakers and urban planners seeking to address the specific needs of middle-sized urban areas and their young residents. Therefore, future research is needed to advance both theoretical and practical contributions to urban studies.

Author Contributions: J.J. and P.B. are equal participants in preparing, editing and submitting this manuscript. J.J. was initially responsible for the data coding, and preparation of the Methods and Results parts. Meanwhile, P.B. focused on the Introductory, Discussion and Conclusion parts. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This article is a part of the research conducted under the ERA-NET (ENUTC) project "TRUSTMAKING: Young creators and responsibilities for the new green transition" (F-ENUCT-2021-0168). This project is funded by the European Union under an agreement with the Research Council of Lithuania (agreement No. S-ENUTC-22-1). The funding period is 1 March 2022–28 February 2025.

Data Availability Statement: Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript; or in the decision to publish the results.

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